

At Least I Tried by prompt_fills

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Summary:

Steve has given it a lot of thought before deciding that slipping a note into Billy's locker is his best option.

It's a solid plan with many advantages. Namely, if Billy reacts badly after reading it, Steve won't be there to get his teeth punched out.

The thing is, Steve's plans never work out the way he wants.

AKA

When it comes to throwing himself a pity party, Steve is the king.

At Least I Tried

Author's Note:

A fic for [the harringrove challenge](#):

*I'm sittin' eyes wide open and I got one thing stuck in my mind,
wondering if I dodged a bullet or just lost the love of my life.*

Steve has given it a lot of thought before deciding that slipping a note into Billy's locker is his best option.

It's a solid plan with many advantages. Namely, if Billy reacts badly after reading it, Steve won't be there to get his teeth punched out.

"No turning back now," Steve mutters to himself, squaring his shoulders and striding down the hall to the row of lockers. He steals a quick glance behind him to make sure no one sees him.

It's super early and save for Jonathan and Nancy, doing god knows what in the darkroom, there isn't anyone else in the school yet.

One can never be too cautious.

Steve opens and folds the slip of paper again. Now or never.

If his confession doesn't go as planned, at least he won't be there to witness the blowout. Billy will have some time too cool off before he has to see Steve again for the third period. And if worst comes to worst, Steve will only have to endure a week and a half of death threats before their graduation.

He'd be forever wondering if he didn't take this chance.

He pushes the folded note through the slit and hears it flop down inside the locker. He immediately wishes he could take it back, heart speeding, palms sweating.

He lets out a slow exhale. That's why he chose a note. So that he

couldn't backtrack and so that he wouldn't blabber nonsense if standing face to face with Billy. Writing might never be his strong suit but in this case, he prefers the advantage of thinking about what exactly he wants to tell Billy.

Steve isn't sure what kind of a reaction he expected but it wasn't anything like this.

On the sleepless nights he thought about the anger he might provoke. He created scenarios in his head how Billy could use his knowledge to turn Steve's life into a pile of ashes. Steve would deny it all, of course, and his parents would surely believe his word over Billy's allegations but there would be *rumours*. There would be glances and jeering and Steve isn't sure how he would cope with that.

On the few blessed nights when he fell asleep, Steve dreamt about Billy waiting for him after their classes were over, watching him with hunger in his eyes. There would be a small, pleased smile on his face instead of his usual smirk. He would lick his lips and stare at Steve challengingly, daring him to make good on the promise he made in the note. And Steve would cross the distance between them and kiss him, maybe earning a surprised moan, maybe managing to talk Billy into taking the Camaro for *a ride*.

What Steve never imagined was Billy ignoring him completely.

At first it's a relief. Frankly, Billy beating the living daylight out of him seemed just as probable as Billy taking Steve up on his offer. So, no violence is a good sign.

But as the day goes on, Billy doesn't do *anything*. Steve doesn't catch him lingering with his gaze on Steve, Steve doesn't see any flash of emotions on Billy's face when they pass each other in the hallway.

Steve loiters once their last period is over. He's slow to pack up his things, even slower to get to his locker and slower still on his way to his car, giving Billy every chance to catch him alone and talk about it.

Billy doesn't wait up for him and his Camaro is long gone by the time Steve shuffles to the parking lot.

The next day is the same, so is the day after that. Billy keeps on ignoring him like nothing ever happened.

Steve can hardly focus on anything that goes on at school. He keeps expecting the other shoe to drop. He keeps shooting Tommy and his new gang of fools suspicious glances, waiting for the moment the *whispering* starts. But it never does.

When Nancy approaches him, expression soft and uncomfortably close to pity, Steve braces himself, the denial already on the tip of his tongue. *'It's all just hearsay, Nancy. You of all people should know better,'* he would tell her. But Nancy only wants to know if Steve would like to join her and Jonathan on a trip to the lake this afternoon. There aren't many things Steve would like less. Laurie and some other people from their school will be there too, Nancy says.

Steve goes with them and spends the whole afternoon trying not to glare at the way Vicki wraps herself around Billy. To his credit, Billy is as quick to flirt and forget as always. He doesn't seem really interested but then again, he never does. One of the reasons Steve opted for the note.

It takes four days of this for Steve to understand. His cheeks flame when he realizes that Billy Hargrove, of all people, is being the bigger man and this is his way of letting Steve down gently. He doesn't want to cause a scene, he has no desire to fight with Steve. He no longer has anything to prove, Steve guesses.

With all the fights Billy got himself into recently, all of which he won, Steve figures he should be grateful.

He closes his eyes and wishes he never wrote that stupid, sappy note. He should have known better.

Billy's silence hurts just as much as a punch to the stomach.

Steve spends the rest of their school days in a haze. Good thing the grading period is already over because Steve's grades would take a

serious nosedive.

“Morning, Steve,” Max says brightly. She seems to be in a good mood and Steve quickly plasters on a smile. He doesn’t want her day to turn sour because of him.

It’s the second week of June, the weather is great, everyone is more than ready for the summer break to begin. Except for Steve.

“Hi, Max,” he says as she gets in the car.

“So? How does it feel?” She asks as she fastens her seatbelt, he doesn’t have to prompt her. “Is it any different now that you’ve finally graduated?”

“It’s weird,” Steve says. “I’m still driving to the school to drop you off but I’m not coming inside for anymore lectures, ever.”

“You should sound happier about that.”

“About taking you to school every day because your brother was gone the moment high school was over?”

“Steve,” Max says with a sigh. “I mean, I’m glad you offered, you know. It’s only a few more days and then our school year is over as well. And you should be proud that you finished high school.”

“Yeah. Well,” Steve peels off the side of the road, leaving Max’s house in the distance. “I know.”

She’s right, of course, but he can’t shake the sense of finality that hit him when his old classmates run in all directions after the graduation ceremony. He’ll never see some of them again and he guesses he should be mostly glad about that but he can’t help the mawkish feelings that gnaw on him.

“So what’s bugging you?”

“The college’s starting soon, I guess,” he manages. “Lots of

arrangements to make.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Max watching him. “You’ve got the whole summer to figure it out. Still no luck with the housing?”

Steve shakes his head. “Should have started looking into that earlier.” *Earlier*, he didn’t even know he was going to Chicago. *Earlier*, his head was full of stupid hopes and childish dreams. *Earlier*, he could look his father dead in the eye and claim he’s not going to college. But now there’s nothing for him to do here in this town. Going to college to get away from it all, from the town as well as from his parents, it doesn’t seem so bad.

“You’ll figure it out,” Max says with confidence and turns her head to stare out of the window.

“Sure,” Steve nods. He doubts it, though.

They’re nearly at the school when Max says, “Billy’s postcard arrived yesterday, you know?”

“Oh?” Steve keeps his tone disinterested. “How’s California?”

Max turns her head sharply, her hair falling like a curtain off her shoulder. “California? He didn’t go to California.”

“Uh-umm, okay,” Steve hums. He desperately wants to ask but he doesn’t. Something in him is still bitter that Billy didn’t even *acknowledge him* to turn him down.

Steve parks the car but Max doesn’t get out right away. She bites her lip before blurting out, “You should have asked him, you know?”

Steve’s stomach clenches. Damn it, had they all known? “What?”

Max huffs. “You should have asked him, Steve. He would take you with him.”

Steve lets out a humourless chuckle. “I very much doubt that, kid.”

Max unfastens her seatbelt and grabs her bag. "You would have known if you asked!"

Steve heaves a sigh. What does it matter anyway. "I asked him, Max."

She's already fumbling for the door handle but she stops dead in her tracks. "What?" Her voice is a shrill of disbelief.

Steve runs a hand through his hair, probably making even bigger mess of it. "I asked him, he didn't like the idea, we never spoke about it again."

Max is frowning at him. "That can't be right, Steve. I just *know* it."

"Yeah, well. You know jack shit."

Max clucks her tongue, reaching for his hand to tug it away from his hair. "When did you ask him? Did he even hear you? Maybe he didn't understand what you meant."

"I think I made myself pretty clear in the note, Max."

"What note?" She sounds urgent.

Steve rolls his eyes, hearing how stupid he sounds when he says, "I left him a note in his locker, like, two weeks before we graduated."

Max opens her mouth, then closes it again. Her grip on Steve's arm tightens. "Have you never noticed," she says, sounding frustrated, "that he didn't use his locker anymore?"

"*What?*"

"Said he lost his combination, went to ask about it but I don't know what they told him." Max's staring at him, her eyes wide. "He couldn't care less and didn't want to spend forever trying random combinations, so he just stored stuff in the car for the last few weeks."

Steve gulps. "I didn't know that."

"Oh, Steve."

“Hey, do you know if they cleared seniors’ lockers yet?”

“I don’t think so? I think they do that once the school year is over for everybody.”

“Good,” Steve says, killing off the engine and getting out of the car.

“Steve?”

“Go to your classes, Max,” he dismisses her. “I feel like spending forever trying random combinations.”

Max looks at him as if he lost his mind and trails after him to the school.

It takes a while but finally he gets the locker open, with the trusted pattern on high-low-high numbers.

The note is there, sitting innocently on top of a pile of some books.

Steve snatches it before Max has the chance to get to it. He barely spares the paper a glance before crumpling it into a small ball in his fist. He doesn’t have to look, he remembers every pathetic word of his confession.

Max reaches out her hand, curious. “What does it say?”

Steve shoves the paper into a pocket of his jeans. “A friendship offer,” he says and it’s only a half-lie.

“Oh, Steve,” Max sighs. She can see right through him, Steve realizes.

“He never read it,” Steve says with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

On the bright side, he tells himself, at least he was spared the humiliation of the rejection. And he has the damning note now, so no one from the school can find out.

“I thought he was giving me the cold shoulder,” he says, remembering the past weeks he spent watching Billy expectantly,

waiting for the confrontation.

Max gnaws on her lip again. "I'll... I'll tell you when he gets back home."

Steve looks at her and then says, softly, "Kid, he's never coming back here." Billy hated this town and he hated everybody in it.

Max shakes her head. "He made me a promise!" She doesn't sound too sure.

Steve pats her shoulder. "Sure, sure. Hey, you should take all his shit and clear the locker."

Max grabs the books, then smirks to herself. She thrusts one book into Steve's hands. "Here, you should keep this one."

Steve glances down at the book. The spine is slightly cracked. Steve runs his fingers along it. "Firestarter?"

Max hums, shoves some of Billy's old textbooks into her bag. "I think you might like it."

"Okay." He clutches the book to his chest. A keepsake.

The bell rings.

"Go to your classes, Max," Steve says again.

"Sure." Max zips her bag, peers into the now empty locker one more time to make sure nothing is left behind. "And Steve?"

"Hm?" His fingers absent-mindedly trace King's name printed on the spine.

"If you have actually spoken to Billy," she says, hauling her bag over her shoulder, grinning up at Steve, "you would know he was accepted to the UIC. Right now he's taking the summer session."

She sprints to her classes, leaving Steve standing in the middle of the hallway, staring after her in disbelief.

A cautious ray of hope wraps itself around his chest. Maybe, just maybe, he hasn't blown all his chances yet.